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Home College Series.

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DANIEL WEBSTER.

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BY REV. DR. C. ADAMS.

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And what a young man may do in this respect, a young woman, and both old men and old women, may do.

J. H. VINCENT.

NEW YORK, Jan., 1883.

DANIEL WEBSTER.

DANIEL WEBSTER was born at Salisbury, N. H., in January, 1782. His early school advantages, like those of most farmers' sons in New Hampshire, at that time, were very limited. Sometimes, for two or three months, he attended school in his own neighborhood. Then, again, when the school was "done keeping," he would be obliged to walk a distance of two or three miles to enjoy the advantages of another that was still in session. Being, in his childhood, somewhat more feeble than many other boys of his age, he was, on this account, favored with a greater amount of schooling; so that a somewhat waggish half-brother was wont to remark that "Dan was sent to school that he might get to know as much as the other boys."

One of the teachers of his boyhood—a Mr. Tappan—addressed a letter to his quondam pupil when the latter was Secretary of State, relating some of the incidents of the old time. To this letter Mr. Webster promptly replied—accompanying his answer with a handsome present to his old schoolmaster.

It was early discovered by his parents that Daniel possessed a more than ordinary intellect, and that he was capable of achievements in his studies beyond what was common. It was, accordingly, soon determined to afford him the advantages of a liberal education. It is related that when the father communicated to his son this important and eventful decision, the latter fell upon his father's neck and wept for joy.

At fourteen years of age he was sent to the Phillips' Academy, at Exeter, to enter upon his preparatory studies. On presenting himself for examination as a candidate for admission, Dr. Abbot, the preceptor, gave him, as a reading exer-

cise, the twenty-second chapter of Matthew. The precept heard him read with the profoundest interest, and so great was he impressed and astonished at the excellence of the reading, that he proceeded no farther with the examination but at once said to him, "Young man, you are qualified to enter this institution."

He immediately and diligently entered upon his studies and his superior scholarship was soon apparent. After being a month at the academy, on occasion of a general examination of his class, at the close, the teacher announced his decision as follows: "Webster, you will pass into the other room, and join a higher class. Boys, you will take your final leave of Webster, for you will never see him again."

One thing, however, strange to say, Webster could never do while at the academy. He could never declaim. "I could not," he says, "make a declamation. I could not speak before the school. Many a piece did I commit to memory and recite and rehearse in my own room over and over again; yet when the day came, when the school collected to hear declamations, as my name was called, and I saw all eyes turned to my seat, I could not raise myself from it. Sometimes the instructors frowned, sometimes they smiled. But I never could command sufficient resolution." This is certainly a most noticeable fact of a youth who afterward became the greatest orator of his time.

Webster continued at the academy during nine months, and his career there, though so brief, was eminently successful—"winning," says one, "golden opinions from his teachers, and surprising them hourly by his masterly exhibitions of mental power." Finishing his preparatory studies under the tutorship of Rev. Dr. Woods, of Boscawen—a man of great benevolence and goodness, and an eminent teacher—Webster entered Dartmouth College in 1797, at fifteen years of age. His preparation had been somewhat hurried, yet his examination was respectable, while the first impressions pro-

duced upon the minds of the professors by his manners and bearing, as he stood up before them, was highly favorable. Even then his appearance is said to have been as dignified, easy, and elegant, as in his after life.

Webster was diligent and faithful as a college student. Mathematical studies were not his favorite pursuits, and in these he was only respectable. He delighted in the classics, and cultivated them with great enthusiasm and success—rendering them into English in a style of great accuracy and beauty. These studies he seems to have pursued much beyond the required exercises of the college. “Cicero” was, with him, a special favorite, with whose orations he made himself entirely familiar. So, also, “Virgil” was his delight; and so conversant was the young student with these famous authors, that he could repeat from memory extended passages from the orations of the one, and the great epic of the other. Hence came that wonderful facility of classical quotation which was a prominent characteristic of his eloquence, and in which he had no superior. In rhetorical studies, as well as in Moral Philosophy, he was unequaled by any of his classmates, and it was doubted whether, in these branches, he was excelled by the professors themselves. In addition to the prescribed studies, he read extensively, especially in history, poetry, and criticism.

“In college,” says one of his professors, “he was remarkable for his steady habits, his intense application to study, and his punctual attendance upon all the prescribed exercises. I know that he was never absent from a recitation, or from morning and evening prayers in the chapel, or from public worship on the Sabbath; and I doubt if ever a smile was seen upon his face during any religious exercise. He was always in his place, and with a decorum suited to it. He emphatically minded his own business, and, as steady as the sun, he pursued, with intense application, the great object for which he came to college.”

“Daniel Webster,” says a recent writer, “had such qualities as made every one feel that he was the first man in the college. Tall, gaunt, and sallow, with an incomparable forehead, and those cavernous and brilliant eyes of his, he had much of the large and tranquil presence which was so important an element of his power over others at all periods of his life. His letters of this time, as well as the recollection of his fellow-students, show him the easy, humorous, rather indolent, and strictly correct ‘good fellow,’ whom professors and companions equally relished. He browsed much in the college library, and had the habit of bringing to bear upon the lesson of the hour the information gathered in his miscellaneous reading—a practice that much enlivens the monotony of recitation.” *

Webster was graduated honorably in the summer of 1804 and returning home, he immediately entered upon the study of law with a neighboring lawyer—T. W. Thompson, Esq.—graduate of Harvard College, and successful in his profession. Desirous, however, of aiding his brother, Ezekiel, now in college, Webster engaged, for a little time, in teaching—taking charge of an academy in Fryeburg, Me. Here he continued nine months with much acceptance, diligently occupying his leisure hours, meanwhile, in pursuing his law studies, and still cultivating, withal, a deeper and broader acquaintance with the English classics.

Retiring from the academy, he divided the funds which he had earned with his brother, and immediately resumed in the office of Mr. Thompson, his study of law. Here he continued eighteen months, most diligently and laboriously prosecuting his studies.

From the office of Mr. Thompson he entered that of Hon. Christopher Gore, an eminent lawyer of Boston. Here he continued seven months, engaged in reading the higher departments of the law, and enjoying, in the meantime, the

* “North American Review.”

eloquent and luminous instructions of Mr. Gore. He was admitted to the Bar in 1805—highly qualified for entrance upon his profession.

Webster commenced practice in Boscawen, and opened an office not far from his father's residence. His first cause was a civil suit, his father being upon the bench, and many who knew him from childhood were in attendance. The occasion, of course, was one of deep interest to the young lawyer, who made a special and triumphant effort.

At the end of two years Mr. Webster removed to Portsmouth, where a wider field was opened before him for the practice of his profession. Here, as associates and competitors, he entered the lists with such men as Mason, Smith, and others—strong men, and men of renown in their profession, and such as were capable of at once perceiving and appreciating the genius and abilities of the new comer. Mr. Smith, about this time, uttered the following testimony of Mr. Webster: "In single qualities I have known men superior to Mr. Webster. Hamilton had more original genius. Ames greater quickness of imagination. Marshal, Parker, and Dexter were as remarkable for logical strength. But in the union of high intellectual qualities, I have known no man equal to Daniel Webster."

Several prosperous years succeeded. The young lawyer applied himself with great industry to his profession, while, at the same time, he was continually enlarging his general knowledge, and rallying to himself every qualification adapted to insure success. And success, in his case, followed swiftly on the heels of diligence and energy; and by the time he was thirty years of age his name had become familiar throughout his native State, and his reputation as a learned, strong, and successful lawyer was fully established.

Jeremiah Mason, a great and famous lawyer of Portsmouth, N. H., was Webster's fit antagonist. "Mason," says one writer, "was a vigilant, vigorous opponent. . . . It was in

keen encounters with this wary and learned man that Daniel Webster learned his profession ; and this he always acknowledged." "If," said he, "any body thinks I am somewhat familiar with the law on some points, and should be curious to know how it happened, tell him that Jeremiah Mason compelled me to study it. He was my master." It should be added that rivals as were these two men, they were, however, firm and life-long friends.

It could not be that Mr. Webster should long remain a mere private citizen. He was not slow in developing himself as not merely a skillful and learned lawyer, but as possessing many of the qualities of a broad and enlightened statesmanship. Hence, he was soon pointed out as a fit candidate for the National Legislature, and, in November, 1812, he was elected a representative from New Hampshire to the Congress of the United States. This election was unsought and unwished for by Mr. Webster, whose decided preference was for private life, and an undisturbed and exclusive devotion to the labors of his profession.

But having been elected to Congress, he immediately began to give special attention to public affairs, and the great questions then agitating the country. Thus he passed the succeeding winter, acquainting himself, so far as possible with national politics, in order to a complete qualification for the important trust confided to him.

In May following his election, at a special session of Congress, he entered that body, and was immediately appointed by Speaker Clay, upon the Committee of Foreign Relations—ranking, in time of war, as the first in importance. His maiden speech was eminently successful, and he was listened to with marked attention and interest. "Before he was half through, all speculations were over ; he had mastered his position, had gained his auditors, and nothing remained but a deeper and deeper interest, till speaker and hearer were lost in that indescribable feeling, all-subduing spell, which

in oratorical triumph always throws around the orator." (TEFFT.)

Daniel Webster was no longer a mere New Hampshire representative; he was, henceforth, a national man, and clothed all suddenly with a national reputation.

Our limits will not permit any minute sketch of Mr. Webster's subsequent action in this important session of Congress. It was a time of war with Great Britain, to which war, as a Federalist, he was sentimentally opposed, although, while existing, he lent it his support. Thus closed his first Congressional term, during which, it was said of him, by one of his Southern opponents, that "the North had not his equal, nor the South his superior."

At the close of Mr. Webster's second Congressional term, he, in August, 1816, removed to Boston, having in view, by this change, a broader field of professional activity and enterprise. Here, for seven years, he devoted himself strictly to the law, with but little participation in political affairs.

Among the cases of the first importance in which, about this time, he enlisted, was that of Dartmouth College. After this college had been in successful operation during forty-seven years under a corporation of twelve trustees, the New Hampshire Legislature passed an act enlarging the corporation by the addition of nine trustees, and transferring to the new Board "all the property, rights, powers, liberties, and privileges of the old corporation." The old corporation resisted this change, which, being confirmed by the Supreme Court of New Hampshire, was carried up, by writ of error, to the Supreme Court of the United States, and argued by Mr. Webster for the old corporation.

This was the occasion for one of those masterly efforts of Webster which have made him famous for all time.

It was his first appearance at that august tribunal, and the elite of the profession were in attendance. Prof. Goodrich, Yale College, who went to Washington on purpose to

hear Webster, thus describes the speaker and some attendant circumstances :

“Mr. Webster entered upon his argument in the calm tone of easy and dignified conversation. His matter was so completely at his command, that he scarcely looked at his brief, but went on, for more than four hours, with a statement so luminous, and a chain of reasoning so easy to be understood, and yet approaching so nearly to absolute demonstration, that he seemed to carry with him every man of his audience without the slightest effort or weariness on either side. It was hardly eloquence in the strict sense of the term; it was pure reason. Now and then, for a sentence or two, his eye flashed, and his voice swelled into a bolder note, as he uttered some emphatic thought; but he instantly fell back into the tone of earnest conversation, which ran throughout the great body of his speech.

“The argument ended. Mr. Webster stood, for some moments, silent before the court, while every eye was fixed intently upon him. At length, addressing the Chief-Justice Marshall, he proceeded thus:

“‘ *This, sir, is my case!* It is the case not merely of that humble institution, it is the case of every college in our land. It is more. It is the case of every eleemosynary institution throughout our country—of all those great charities founded by the piety of our ancestors to alleviate human misery and scatter blessings along the pathway of life. It is more! It is, in some sense, the case of every man among us who has property of which he may be stripped; for the question is simply this: Shall our State Legislatures be allowed to take *that* which is not their own, to turn it from its original use, and apply it to such ends or purposes as they, in their discretion, shall see fit?

“‘ Sir, you may destroy this little institution; it is weak; it is in your hands! I know it is one of the lesser lights in the literary horizon of our country. You may put it out. But,

if you do, you must carry through your work ! You must extinguish, one after another, all those great lights of science which, for more than a century, have thrown their radiance over our land !

“‘It is, sir, as I have said, a small college, and yet *there are those who love it !*’

“Here the feelings which he had thus far succeeded in keeping down, broke forth. His lips quivered, his firm cheeks trembled with emotion, his eyes were filled with tears, his voice choked, and he seemed struggling to the utmost simply to gain that mastery over himself which might save him from an unmanly burst of feeling. . . .

“‘The court-room,” continues Prof. Goodrich, “during these two or three minutes, presented an extraordinary spectacle. Chief-Justice Marshall, with his tall, gaunt figure bent over as if to catch the slightest whisper, the deep furrows of his cheek expanded with emotion, and his eyes suffused with tears ; Mr. Justice Washington at his side, with his small and emaciated frame, and countenance more like marble than I ever saw on any other human being—leaning forward with an eager, troubled look ; and the remainder of the court, at the two extremities, pressing, as it were, toward a single point, while the audience below were wrapping themselves round in closer folds beneath the bench to catch each look, and every movement of the speaker’s face. . . . There was not one among the strong-minded men of that assembly who could think it unmanly to weep, when he saw standing before him the man who had made such an argument melted into the tenderness of a child.

“Mr. Webster had now recovered his composure ; and turning his keen eye on the Chief-Justice, said—in that deep tone with which he sometimes thrilled the heart of an audience—‘Sir, I know not how others may feel, (glancing at the opponents of the college before him, some of whom were its former graduates,) but for myself, when I see my *Alma*

Mater surrounded, like Cæsar in the Senate house, by those who are reiterating stab upon stab, I would not for this right hand have her turn to me and say, *Et tu quoque, mi fili!*—And thou, too, my son !’

“He sat down. There was a death-like stillness throughout the room for some moments. Every one seemed to be slowly recovering himself, and coming gradually back to his ordinary range of thought and feeling.”

Judge Story, afterward remarking upon this great effort of Webster, said: “For the first hour we listened to him with perfect astonishment ; for the second hour, with perfect delight ; and for the third hour, with perfect conviction.” Says Mr. Willard: “It is not too much to say that he (Webster) entered the court, on that day, a comparatively unknown name, and left it with no rival but Pinckney.”

We may add from Mr. Everett: “This case established Mr. Webster’s reputation at the Supreme Court of the United States. It placed him with Emmet, Pinckney, and Wirt, in the front rank at the American Bar, and though considerably the youngest of the group, on an equality with the most distinguished of them. He was, henceforward, retained in almost every considerable cause argued at Washington.”

Among the more celebrated of these causes were the great Steam-monopoly case of Gibbons and Ogden, the Charles River Bridge case, the Alabama Bank case, that of the Validity of Mr. Girard’s Will, the Rhode Island Charter case, and many others ; also the celebrated trials of Goodridge, at Newbury, and Knapp, at Salem, amply illustrate Mr. Webster’s skill as a criminal lawyer to have been “unsurpassed at the tribunals of any country.”

Unsurpassed, likewise, must be pronounced those great oratorical efforts which, at different times, came from the lips of Mr. Webster. Among these are to be included his celebrated oration at Plymouth on the anniversary of the landing

of the Pilgrim fathers ; his orations at the laying of the corner-stone and at the completion of the Bunker Hill Monument ; the eulogy on Adams and Jefferson, and his discourse on laying the corner-stone of the Capitol extension at Washington.

In December, 1823, Mr. Webster again entered Congress—a member from Massachusetts. He held his place in the House till June, 1827, when, by a very large majority of the Massachusetts Legislature, he was transferred to the National Senate. He came to the Senate at forty-five years of age, in the bright and full maturity of his powers, and with the highest reputation as a lawyer, statesman, and orator.

Not long after his entering the Senate occurred Mr. Webster's great debate with Mr. Hayne, of South Carolina. His second speech, in reply to Mr. Hayne, is considered the most celebrated effort ever occurring, before or since, in the Congress of the United States. Said one who heard the speech, "It was on Tuesday, January 26, 1830, a day to be hereafter forever memorable in Senatorial annals—that the Senate resumed the consideration of Foote's Resolution—the resolution in debate. There was never before in the city an occasion of so much excitement. To witness this great intellectual contest, multitudes of strangers had, for two or three days, been rushing into the city, and the hotels overflowed. As early as nine o'clock of this morning, crowds poured into the Capitol in hot haste. At twelve o'clock, the hour of meeting, the Senate Chamber—its floor, galleries, and even lobbies—was filled to its utmost capacity. The very stair-ways were dark with men, who hung to one another like bees in a swarm. . . .

"Mr. Webster perceived and felt equal to the destinies of the moment. The very greatness of the hazard exhilarated him. . . . He rose and addressed the Senate. His exordium is known by heart every-where : 'Mr. President, when the mariner has been tossed for many days in thick weather,

and on an unknown sea, he naturally avails himself of the first pause in the storm, the earliest glance of the sun, to take his latitude, and ascertain how far the elements have driven him from his true course. Let us imitate this prudence, and before we float farther on the waves of this debate, refer to the point from which we departed, that we may at least be able to form some conjecture where we now are. I ask for the reading of the Resolution.' ”

Mr. Marsh goes on to add that, “There wanted no more to enchain the attention. . . . As the speech proceeded, no one who was not present can understand the excitement of the scene. No one who was can give an adequate description of it. . . . No one ever looked the orator as he did. His countenance spake no less audibly than his words. His manner gave new force to his language. As he stood swaying his right arm, like a huge sledge-hammer, up and down, his swarthy countenance lighted up with excitement, he appeared, amid the smoke, the fire, the thunder of his eloquence, like Vulcan in his armory forging thoughts for the gods.” The wonderful peroration of his speech is known by every school-boy. As he went through it, the rush of feeling threw a glow over his countenance like inspiration. Eye, brow, each feature, every line of the face, seemed touched with a celestial fire. All gazed as at something more than human. The swell and roll of his voice struck upon the ears of the spell-bound audience in deep and melodious cadence as the waves upon the shore of the far-resounding sea.”

It is needless to add that the effect on the hearers of this great speech was overpowering. As the speech closed, “the tones of the orator still lingered upon the ear, and the audience, unconscious of the close, retained their positions. The agitated countenance, the heaving breast, the suffused eye, attested the continuance of the spell upon them.”

During the ten succeeding years, Mr. Webster continued in the Senate, and actively participated in all the great and

stirring discussions of that eventful decade. Meanwhile, his popularity steadily increased as these years went on, and as his public services came to be more fully understood and appreciated. Writes Dr. Tefft, one of his biographers, "He was now acknowledged, on all hands, as the first American statesman, and the pride of the American Republic. On nearly every subject which had not been incorporated into the creeds of the parties his opinion was of about the same force as law to a great majority of his countrymen. The whole country followed him with regard, admiration, and eulogiums."

In a brief visit to Europe, in 1839, Mr. Webster found that his great popularity had preceded him to foreign countries. "No traveler," says Mr. Everett, speaking of this visit, "has, probably, ever been received with equal attention in the highest quarters in England. Courtesies, usually paid only to ambassadors and foreign ministers, were extended to him. His table was covered with invitations to the seats of the nobility and gentry." Being present, by invitation, at a celebration of the Royal Agricultural Society, after a speech, he attempted more than once to take his seat. But he was forced to continue his speech, "by the cheers, plaudits, and vociferous demands from every part of the assemblage; and when he sat down, at the conclusion of his extempore address of about thirty minutes, he had said enough to convince every man present, and that entire England which, in less than three days, had read and admired his speech, that there was no illusion, no fiction, no exaggeration, in the American and European fame of the great lawyer, statesman, and orator of his age and country."

On the accession of Mr. Harrison to the Presidency, in 1841, Mr. Webster became Secretary of State. Mr. Harrison dying at the end of one month from his inauguration, Mr. Webster, however, retained the charge of the State Department through the first two years of the Tyler administration. It

was in this interval that several difficult and important questions, of long standing, between England and this country were finally and happily adjusted. Of these, the two principal ones were that of the North-eastern boundary and that of the search of American vessels by British cruisers in African waters.

For the settlement of these irritating questions a special British envoy, Lord Ashburton, was sent to the United States—a gentleman of a friendly and candid disposition, and eminently qualified for his important mission. Mr. Webster met the ambassador in a spirit and temper equally friendly with his own; and in the course of about four months a treaty was agreed to whereby the questions at issue were satisfactorily adjusted, and the treaty received the prompt approval of the two Governments. Thus these grave and dangerous questions were amicably and forever settled; and here Mr. Webster performed another great public service which, had it been the only one of his life, would have entitled him to the gratitude of his country and to posterity.

Retiring from the cabinet, after two years of most effective service there, Mr. Webster was privileged, after twenty years of continuous public life, to enjoy a brief interval of rest. This interval he spent partly in professional duties and partly upon his farms, where, in the oversight of his agricultural interests, in his favorite recreations of hunting and fishing, and in the enjoyment of his ample library, he seems to have passed two of the happiest years of his life. And this was well; for they were destined to be his only years of comparative leisure, and he would soon go forth again to participate actively in the great and stirring movements transpiring in the country; and he would, henceforth, necessarily be a man of war, and would put off the harness only to die.

Nor, of course, even in his few months of retirement, could he shut his eyes to the great public movements of the time. The project of Texas Annexation—a war with Mexico as a

certain consequence ; the election of Mr. Polk to the Presidency instead of Mr. Clay—an election fraught, in the view of Mr. Webster, with the most serious consequences ; these and kindred considerations could not fail to enlist his most careful attention and gravest concern ; for the welfare of his country, and of the whole country, seems to have been the absorbing and *passionate* idea of his life.

So important, in the view of Mr. Webster, was the election of Mr. Clay to the Presidency, and the defeat of Mr. Polk, that he hesitated not to participate actively in the canvass. At the commencement of the Polk administration he resumed his seat in the United States Senate, as the successor of Mr. Choate. In spite of his efforts, the Texas Annexation scheme was consummated, and was followed, as was foreseen, by the Mexican war. Though strenuously opposed to this unhappy war, yet when actually entered upon, Mr. Webster deemed it his duty to vote the necessary supplies of sustenance and troops. He gave, also, one of his sons to the war, who, after enduring the hardships of the service, died of sickness at the City of Mexico.

In closing this brief sketch of Daniel Webster, it is painful to be obliged to pass over several prominent events of his life, of equal importance and interest with those already presented. A slight space only remains for one or two personal details, and the final conclusion of his career.

One of his biographers thus sums up his general appearance and habits :

“Mr. Webster’s person was imposing, of commanding height, and well proportioned ; his head of great size ; the face deep-seated, large, and lustrous ; his voice powerful, sonorous, and flexible ; his action, without being remarkably graceful, appropriate and impressive. In debate no amount of violence of opposition ever shook his self-possession for a moment. A consummate master of argument, he touched not less skillfully all the chords of feeling. On occasions of

mere ceremony he did not greatly shine ; on great occasions and great subjects, with or without preparation, he had no superior. . . . The style of his compositions was vigorous, terse, pure English, free from every species of affectation, and marked by a manly simplicity. . . . He went to bed and rose early, and dispatched the business of the day as much as possible in the morning hours. He was extremely fond of field sports, particularly fishing, and was a remarkably good shot. His social tastes were strong, and his conversational powers rarely equaled. . . . He was a regular attendant on public worship, a diligent student of the Scriptures, a communicating member of the Church, and a firm believer in the truth of Christianity as a divine revelation."

Previously to the year 1852—the year of his death—Mr. Webster's health had been declining. He left Washington for the last time in August, of the above year, and spent his few closing days at his home in Marshfield. His last visit at Boston was on September 20, from which time he failed rapidly. His last Will and Testament was signed October 21, after which, he folded his hands together and said, "I thank God for strength to perform a sensible act." He then, and "in a full voice," says Mr. Ticknor, who was by his side, "and with a most reverential manner, prayed aloud for some minutes, ending with the Lord's Prayer, and the ascription, 'Now unto God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, be praise for evermore ! Peace on earth and good-will to men !'"

"I still live !" were his last memorable words ; and about half past three o'clock on the morning of October 24, 1852, Daniel Webster fell asleep.

DANIEL WEBSTER.

(THOUGHT-OUTLINE TO HELP THE MEMORY.)

1. Birth? Liberal education proposed? His schools and masters? Declamation a hardship? Mathematics distasteful? Devotion to college duties? Graduation and law studies? Teachers in law? Opponents in practice? Jeremiah Mason?
2. Public life? Congress? First triumph? Second term? Boston? Dartmouth College case? Other celebrated cases?
3. Congress again? Debate with Mr. Hayne? Europe? Character-sketch? Closing scenes?

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